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A REVIEW OF *VIRAL MODERNISM: THE INFLUENZA PANDEMIC AND INTERWAR LITERATURE*

Elizabeth Outka. *Viral Modernism: The Influenza Pandemic and Interwar Literature* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2020), xii + 326 pp., ISBN 978-0-231-1875-2.

Reviewed by Maria Rita Drumond Viana

When George Yeats took to bed with the so-called Spanish Flu on November 18, 1918,¹ W. B. Yeats relayed his wife's desire to have his sister Lily by her side—but only in case she did not feel better soon. This tentative request was made not because of a lack of proximity between the two new sisters-in-law but because Lily was already making preparations to be rushed to another bedside: that of her own father, John B. Yeats, then in New York City and also stricken with pneumonia. The two competing demands for Lily Yeats's attention, from family members on both sides of the Atlantic, perfectly illustrate the global impact of the 1918 influenza pandemic on populations around the world: the three main waves (May–July 1918, September–December 1918, and January–May 1919) hit parts of every continent almost simultaneously, with the more serious cases (such as the Yeateses') and the highest number of deaths being concentrated in the twelve terrible weeks that surrounded the Armistice in Europe. Yeats's plans to relocate the growing family to Oxford had to be put off and, with Thoor Ballylee closed for the winter, even a move to the comfortable surroundings of Coole Park became impossible, as the flu was also rampant in the country, with nearby Gort crowded "with hearses and funerals," in Lady Gregory's words.²

While these events have long featured with some prominence in the biographies of all three Yeateses, they are more often discussed of in the context of the early years of W. B. and George Yeats's marriage, a period in which the couple invited in some (real) ghosts while attempting to banish (metaphorical) others. It is certainly one of the many ironies that mark W. B. Yeats's concomitant and continuing entanglement with the Gones since his serial proposals beginning in the summer of 1916 that, after the long renovation of Thoor Ballylee as their symbolic family home, the Yeateses would find themselves at 73 St. Stephen's Green. This was the house on which Maud Gonne had taken a lease before being sent to HM Prison Holloway in London, while Iseult Gonne, in her turn, had been forcibly removed to Yeats's bachelor lodgings at 18 Woburn Buildings.

This volatile play at domiciliary musical chairs would soon come to a dramatic, though not totally unexpected, crisis when Maud Gonne herself made her way to Dublin undercover after being given a compassionate leave from prison for health reasons. Upon arrival she demanded admittance to her house, which Yeats denied because of George's condition. In his biography Roy Foster frames these events with, on one hand, an analysis of George's role in effecting some distance between W. B. Yeats and Iseult, including a consideration of "Two Songs for a Fool" as "a poem which framed his symbolic images of George and herself [Iseult], tame and wild, as cat and hare" (*Life* 2 129), and on the other, a performative rejection by W. B. Yeats of Maud Gonne in her illness as "ghastly" and a "tragic sight." Foster then considers how the quarrel plays a role in the genesis of "On a Political Prisoner," a poem which, although ostensibly about Constance Markievicz, harkens back to the Gonnas with its white sea-bird imagery (*Life* 2 139). Ann Saddlemeyer similarly presents George's illness as the storm that follows the relative calm of the spring and summer that had led to marital poems such as "Solomon to Sheba," "Solomon and the Witch," and "The Gift of Harun Al-Rashid" (*Becoming George* 188). As these two examples from biographies show, George's illness tends to be conscribed to the realm of the domestic, of interpersonal relationships, and contextualized as the moment W. B. Yeats (finally) stands up for his by-then pregnant wife and banishes the Gonnas to a more mythical realm.

By reframing Yeats's concern for George in the public context of "The Second Coming," Elizabeth Outka shines new light on both the poem and the couple's lives in her excellent *Viral Modernism*. This effect is achieved for all three main authors considered in the volume's middle section, entitled "Pandemic Modernism," in which she takes on the towering figures of Virginia Woolf, T. S. Eliot, and Yeats. These chapters are central not just because of these subjects' importance in modernist studies but also structurally, given that the book's organization examines later works first in order to do the groundwork and lay terms by which to (re)read the canonic moderns. The third part also brings one last, less weighty chapter, which considers how some of the frameworks developed for reading the more realist works in part one, and the modernists in part two, become, in their turn, metaphors for the supernatural in the popular fiction of figures such as Arthur Conan Doyle and H. P. Lovecraft. This is a methodological feat that escapes the confines of more obvious arrangements and manages to impose a very sound progression in an otherwise unwieldy mix of the canonical and the popular, with one set of texts being recalled and truly helping to illuminate the next. In this sense, it is a book to be read from cover to cover, even while some sets of chapters can work (and have worked) as author-specific studies for specialists. For this reason, before returning to the Yeatses, I must consider the buildup to Outka's central chapters and how her

analysis strikes an innovative note when reading texts as widely studied as *Mrs. Dalloway*, *The Waste Land*, and, more to the scope of this journal, “The Second Coming.”

The introduction opens with what the author calls a “modernist mystery”—that the 1918 influenza pandemic seems to have made few appearances in the British, Irish, and American literature of the period, a perception that classic studies of the pandemic such as John M. Barry’s have helped cement when declaring that “[t]he disease has survived in memory more than in any literature.”³ The operative word, which she does not highlight here but which should jump out at the attentive reader, is *seems*. Part one consists of analyses of more realist works which, according to her argument, have a more overt manner of representing the pandemic because they originate at a greater geographic and temporal distance from the Great War. Written by US Americans between the years of 1922 and 1939, a novella like Katherine Anne Porter’s *Pale Horse, Pale Rider* can “establish the frame we need to see the diffuse elements from the pandemic experiences in part 2” (40). This diffuseness is, in itself, characteristic of the virus, as:

New forms of violence—an internal corruption, a miasmatic enemy, an invisible weapon, a spreading contagion—become foils to the more visible violence of war. The very avoidance of the pandemic fundamentally shapes the period and thus changes how we read it: the virus becomes the ultimate form of Yeats’s “mere anarchy,” an invisible power without human agency and outside all control. (3)

The trope of the “miasma” is certainly the most pervasive and carries considerable explanatory power in every chapter even if, as the author recognizes, by 1918 germ theory had already replaced the explanation of “tainted air” a cause for disease—at least among medical authorities.⁴ The second trope that recurs in the study is what Outka terms “viral resurrection” and is not only related to the various zombie figures of part three but to delirium states and mental-health issues caused by the virus during infection and in its sometimes lifelong after-effects with chronic conditions developed as consequences of the flu.

In bringing a “pandemic literary paradigm” to the reading of Woolf, Eliot, and Yeats, Outka does not propose a cause-and-effect model for elements of modernist style that have already been identified particularly with the war, “argu[ing] instead for a critical recognition of a symbiotic atmosphere of influence” between both pandemic and war:

Collectively, these works [*Mrs. Dalloway*, *The Waste Land*, and “The Second Coming”] shape the sense of global menace, of a coming apocalypse or waste land that involves a form of mass death tied to—but distinct from—the more

visible violence of war. Adjusting our framework to include the shadowy landscape of pandemic suffering requires a parallel retooling of modernist scholarship on violence and the body. (101)

This deceptively modest claim (a mere adjustment) has nevertheless shifted my own understanding of Clarissa Dalloway irrevocably. When Outka first published on the topic in *Modernism/modernity* in 2014, it read like a revelation;⁵ it also led me to Jane Fisher's excellent book-length study of women's narratives of the 1918 pandemic.⁶ The Yeats chapter, however, brings completely original material to her analysis and comprises far more than what the title—"Apocalyptic Pandemic: W. B. Yeats's 'The Second Coming'"—indicates.

In addition to reframing the biographical facts of George's illness, with special consideration of her status as a pregnant woman in Dublin (a reality recently fictionalized by Emma Donoghue in another great historical novel),⁷ from the "internal, bodily apocalypse" to a "vast, societal breakdown" (167) of "The Second Coming," the chapter also contrasts that central poem to other poems of "Yeatsian [sic] violence" (175). Also included is the work of the third Yeats, John Butler Yeats, and his illustrations for an 1895 edition of Daniel Defoe's *A Journal of the Plague Year*.⁸ Though not a Yeatsian herself, Outka deftly covers the expansive grounds of the poem's analyses (including the excision of specific allusions in drafts) and succeeds in supporting her conclusion that:

Despite shared qualities with other works, "The Second Coming" stands as distinct in the nonhuman agency it suggests. "Easter 1916," "Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen," and "Leda and the Swan" may each offer different takes on violence, but they all concern specific people and acts, a specific history, and a human-initiated destruction, all seen from the vantage point of an outside observer who does not seem, quite, to have witnessed the violence in person [. . .]. The difference in this violence does not mean that "The Second Coming" must be about the pandemic, but it does highlight how the poem registers violence that Yeats had seen firsthand and that his wife had experienced, captured from within the immediacy of the trauma and allowing little distance from the unfolding events. (182)

Her pandemic readings add new layers to the well-known "turning and turning," "darkness drops again," and "mere anarchy is loosed," but particularly to "the ceremony of innocence is drowned," and "the blood-dimmed tide is loosed"—the very expressions whose powerful but indefinite allusiveness have made "The Second Coming" the go-to poem of crisis and turmoil among journalists and politicians, as Geraldine Higgins showed us once more in her brilliant plenary at the International Yeats Society Conference 2020.⁹ The conference,

hosted at the University of Łódź, Poland, was the first to take place remotely as we dealt with our own coronavirus pandemic.

Rarely does Outka fail to consider important work done on her corpus or seem to stretched her analyses too far. In the specific case of Yeats I could cite the feeble association of the “winds of winter” in “Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen” with “the terrible winter of the pandemic second wave” (178), or the casting of the titular second coming as the coming of the plague on the heels of war (182). Finally, and more locally, I was mildly irritated to see the name of the editor of this very journal, Rob Doggett, misspelt as “Dugget” on page 180 (though it was correct in the references). These are, however, minor issues in an otherwise thoroughly well-researched publication, which successfully reframes the pandemic presence for modernists and Yeatsians alike.

NOTES

- 1 First diagnosed as pneumonia; see Ann Saddlemyer, *Becoming George: The Life of Mrs. W. B. Yeats* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 195. Pneumonia became a comorbidity with influenza and other acute respiratory syndromes; the the viral infection paved the way for the bacteria, making patients’ prognosis worse. See, among others, David M. Morens, Jeffery K. Taubenberger, and Anthony S. Fauci, “Predominant role of bacterial pneumonia as a cause of death in pandemic influenza: Implications for pandemic influenza preparedness,” *The Journal of Infectious Diseases* 198, no. 7 (2008): 962–970. The sequence of events is inverted to the more usual pattern of disease evolution in the report included in a letter to Edmund Dulac on December 13, 1918: “Two or three days after your letter came my wife developed Influenza & after that Pneumonia” (*CL IntelLex* #3538).
- 2 Augusta Gregory to W.B. Yeats, November 27, 1918, in Saddlemyer, *Becoming George*, 195 and n151.
- 3 John M. Barry, *The Great Influenza: The Story of the Deadliest Pandemic in History*, revised Kindle edition (London: Penguin, 2020), 392.
- 4 Starting in the late seventeenth century with the development of the microscope, germ theory was greatly boosted in the 1880s after Pasteur and Koch isolated the bacilli of anthrax, tuberculosis, and cholera. However, in the general public’s perception, miasmatic explanations for influenza could coexist with an understanding of germ theory, according to Mark Honigsbaum, *A History of the Great Influenza Pandemics* (London: Bloomsbury, 2014), 66.
- 5 Elizabeth Outka, “‘Wood for the Coffins Ran Out’: Modernism and the Shadowed Afterlife of the Influenza Pandemic,” *Modernism/modernity* 21, no. 4 (2014): 937–60.
- 6 Jane Fisher, *Envisioning Disease, Gender, and War: Women’s Narratives of the 1918 Influenza Pandemic* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012).
- 7 Emma Donoghue, *The Pull of the Stars: A Novel* (London: Picador, 2020). As observed by John M. Barry, pregnant women were the most vulnerable group, with death rates reaching 71%; *The Great Influenza*, 240.
- 8 Daniel Defoe, *A Journal of the Plague Year*, vol. 9 of *Romances and Narratives*, ed. George A. Aitken, ill. John Butler Yeats (London: J. M. Dent & Co., 1895).
- 9 For details on the conference hosted by Wit Pietrzak and his team in Poland, see <http://www.yeatsandpop.uni.lodz.pl>; for the most recently published update on her ongoing “Yeats-spotting” in the news, see Geraldine Higgins, “News that Stays New: The Future Life of W.B. Yeats,” *Poetry Ireland Review* 116 (2015): 183–92.